

“Equality” in the Bishops’ Letter on Women

by Mary Ellen Bork

The bishops state at the beginning of their second draft of the Pastoral Letter on Women that they were cautioned many times to delay or abandon their project but chose to complete their task. They further state, “In our efforts to listen to extensive consultations in dialogue with the word of God and to be authentic teachers of the faith, we have had to advance arguments not always acceptable to some segments of the Christian community nor to a number of respected Catholic scholars.” (12) One has to ask which segments of the Christian community they mean.

I find I am one of the Christian and Catholic community unhappy with their framing the Catholic position on women as primarily an issue of equality. Moreover, their discussion of gender difference does little more than recognize basic differences without reflection on the influence of this difference on personal life. By their own admission the bishops are writing on a controversial subject in a controversial way. This may indicate that it is not ripe for publication as an official document which will only fuel further controversy.

In my view the letter’s major weakness is its easy acceptance of feminist rhetoric and the concepts and feelings that go with it and an exaggeration of the evils of sexism. All four sections of the letter deal with equality: equal as persons, equal as persons in relationship, equal as persons in the Church, and equal as persons in society. Equality is a laudable political goal and has been promoted in free democracies since before the French revolution. But equality also has enough ambiguity about it that it can be manipulated in many ways. Americans have never been clear in their political discourse whether they meant equality of opportunity or equality of result, a point under discussion in the Civil Rights Act of 1990.

In response to some women’s claims of oppression the bishops spell out many areas where equality should exist. But what kind of equality, of opportunity or of

result? They seem to dwell on results. The Catholic position on woman cannot be summed up by a search for more equality between men and women. By focusing so exclusively on equality the bishops show their desire to legitimize feminist complaints against the Church now and open the door to approaching future issues in a similar manner. This letter gives implicit approval and sympathy to those who are impatient with oppressive Church structures by speaking of women’s problems as those of “exclusion,” referring to Baptism as the “sacrament of equality,” etc. The Church has always recognized the equal dignity of man and woman and certainly we need to live it better. But there is more to the Catholic position on the human person and on the relations between men and women than equality, important as that is.

A second serious weakness in this letter is its refusal to develop the implications of gender difference. While acknowledging the diversity of men and women (18), who are created equal before God, they neglect to develop the implications of masculinity and femininity. They promote the feminist line of thought.

Women have not been recognized as autonomous persons. “However noble the vocation to marriage and motherhood may be, this approach tends to assume that the man is the norm for being a human person and that a woman’s identity is defined exclusively in reference to her husband.” (20) That is a debatable point, as the students at Wellesley and Barbara Bush have demonstrated.

Their argument continues that the divine image in the human person is shown through our sexuality but it is not necessary to assign traits to either sex. (26) They do not think that the sexes are “two halves of a whole” nor that “one is incomplete without a partner of the opposite sex.” (26) While saying there is a fundamental difference they stop short of describing it. “This distinctiveness is more fundamental than racial, cultural or ethnic differ-

ences.” (25)

Pope John Paul II offers a more profound discussion of this fundamental difference and encourages more study of the issue. In *Christifidelis Laici* and other documents he explains that the sexual difference “has been indelibly imprinted in the very being of the human person—men and women— and, therefore, in the makeup, meaning and deepest workings of the individual. This most wise and loving plan must be explored to discover all its richness of content.”(50) He several times calls for more study and research on the meaning of femininity and masculinity.

He distinguishes between what are the essential aspects of women and the evolving aspects. This distinction allows one to describe some traits that do not change without denying that there are aspects of women that do change. Within the structure of the Church he makes the distinction between the level of holiness in which we are united to Christ without distinction, and the level of function which in a hierarchical Church introduces some differences. In *Mulieris Dignitatem* he points out that women, because they are capable of motherhood, have a gift of attentiveness to the concrete needs of the human person. This would be an essential characteristic of woman. He also points out that the marriage relationship is the fundamental community ordained by God and that

the spirit of the marriage relationship should be the hallmark of relations between men and women, a reflection of the relationship of Christ and His Church. (*Christifidelis Laici*, 52) These distinctions give a more profound and nuanced understanding of woman in her relation to man. The bishops seem reluctant to spell out any differences between men and women or to define any roles. Perhaps they want to leave the door open to the inevitable pressure that will come from those discontented women who will continue to press for more functions and more power.

As an expression of the pastoral concern of America’s bishops this letter lacks: a discussion of anthropology that gives more than a superficial statement of the diversity of male and female and what that means for the Church; a serious discussion of the dangers of radical feminism (it is briefly mentioned in 132); an articulation of the spiritual discernment needed to weigh and sift conflicting ideas about women that are in the culture; a serious discussion of prayer; a criticism of the attitude of women who complain that they are oppressed in the Church (it is accepted as a given).

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